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Philosophical histories can be contextual without being sociological: Comment on Araujo's historiography

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Abstract

The future of the History of Psychology is bright, and the recent historiographical debates in this journal play an important role in that. Yet Araujo's recent contribution could be misunderstood: ignoring context is not the way to do a philosophical history. Instead, philosophical assumptions can be presented as part of the context that informed an historical subject. Hence the necessity, here, of a response: the History of Psychology is becoming disciplined, but slowly. There are still plenty of non-specialists who will misunderstand Araujo's contribution as a step forward in its rhetoric (many of whom teach the history course in their department). And because even specialists also sometimes dismiss methods-talk as a false step toward methodolatry, there is a danger in leaving such misunderstandings unaddressed. Simply put, then, ideas are never only lights in the attic: as the historian looks in, we must always remember that—at the time—someone was looking out.

Keywords

context, historiography, history, history of psychology, new history

Araujo (2017) reduces the contemporary History of Psychology to a kind of sociology: analyses of political, social, and institutional factors. And these, he explains, “do not suffice to explain crucial elements of psychological theories and concepts” (p. 92). But this is a straw man: the *Zeitgeist* approach to history went out with the Apollo program (Ross, 1969). That said, however, there is indeed a more recent social approach to history. It's just that this—the “new history of psychology” (Furumoto, 1989, 2003; see also Brock, 2016; Teo, 2013)—must itself be interpreted in the context of an older related historiographical focus on “great ideas” and “great men.”

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The style of history to which the first (new) Historians of Psychology were responding assumed things of their subjects that are now no longer accepted. Namely, that greatness was something different; an ineffable quality that ought to be celebrated, revered even. Yet the move away from the celebration of greatness was also a shift toward explanatory symmetry: treating success and failure as being relatable, ultimately, to something other than an innate essence. This is now fundamental.

From this perspective, the recent social turn in the historiography of psychology must itself be treated in context. (Or “contexts” [see Ratcliff & Burman, in press].) One might therefore suggest as one of its contexts, for example, the widespread societal impact of the preceding *Brown v. Board of Education* decision ending racial segregation in US public schools (see Benjamin & Crouse, 2002). From even this overly-narrow and overly-American micro-perspective, the point can be made: the social turn is then *both* an intellectual change *and* a reflection of a broader social and political shift. In short, contrary to Araujo’s suggestion that these things can be treated separately: not only must “great men” and “great ideas” be put in context, but so too must the historiographical approach to their examination (see e.g., Ball, 2012).

History and philosophy

Araujo (2017) argues for a *philosophical* history, but is explicit that he means this as a complement to contemporary approaches (p. 89). As a result, his argument can’t simply be dismissed as a retrograde manoeuvre on behalf of the “greats.” Still, it also seems the proposal can be simplified: contextualizing histories are incomplete because they cannot themselves give improved access to the ideas that mattered to those whose contributions are being placed in context.

The discipline would be strengthened by adopting such a view if it could be defended: contemporary Historians of Psychology would be provided with a new justification for intellectual history (which is what it seems psychologists most often want from us). The challenge, then, is in defending the proposed complementarity to the receiving audience of disciplinary gatekeepers. To the extent that errors are being repeated in textbooks, and elsewhere, this seems straightforward. But we aren’t the psychology police. Our goal is insight, perspective, understanding. Our contributions aren’t journalistic, but scholarly. Yet the two approaches—fact-reporting and field-advancing—need not be totally separate either.

In considering the founding of the discipline, for example, it has long been understood that “Leipzig 1879” is a convention born of a specific perspective (see e.g., Boring, 1965). The import of this founding institution was then discovered to have been remade in translation (Blumenthal, 1977; Rieber, 1980). And thus the investigational focus shifted, to reflect the possibility of activist views held by subsequent popularizers (Leahey, 1981; O’Donnell, 1979). It has since continued to shift: ever further from known “results” toward unknown “production processes” and the conditions that made them possible (e.g., Capshew, 1992; Danziger, 1990a; Goodwin, 2005). Simultaneously, this more careful consideration of the “known Wundt” has also afforded an equally careful examination of the “unknown Wundt” (e.g., Danziger, 1983, 1990b, 1980/2001). This is, in turn, where I would place Araujo (2016), along with other authors who are interested more specifically in the originally omitted *Völkerpsychologie* (e.g., Klautke, 2013).

These two kinds of scholarly study—contextualizing the known and uncovering the unknown—are not in conflict, as indeed Araujo suggests they should not be. But they also aren't exactly complementary. Rather, they exist along a continuum; or in levels relative to each other.

If something is to be put in context, the audience must already know about the subject to be contextualized. Contemporary histories are therefore typically about not only an historical *subject*, but they are also about an earlier historical *claim*. This critical approach is also why History itself changes: critique highlights new areas of exploration, and the objects of study shift.

Indeed, the epistemic goalposts are always on the move. We see this in the history of the History of Psychology. An early focus on ideas led to a focus on context: “the new history” (Furumoto, 1989, 2003; see also Brock, 2016; Teo, 2013). Similarly, the early focus on men led to an interest in women; and American psychology, international psychologies (Danziger, 1994). The goalposts will eventually move again. But this is simply a consequence of the application of microhistory as an investigational practice: as more scholarship is produced, it becomes ever more difficult to say anything that isn't directly about the specific details of the particular case under consideration.

Microhistory

I accept that this may strike some readers as a peculiar thing to say. It is not obvious that diminishing marginal returns should apply to Historical investigations: new discoveries can always lead to the novel reinterpretation of old evidence. Nevertheless, it seems to me that the risk of diminution follows directly from what microhistory is. As Galison (2008) explained in an article that Araujo (2017) also cited:

Microhistory is supposed to be exemplification, a display through *particular* detail of something *general*, something more than itself. It is supposed to elicit the subtle interconnections of procedures, values, and symbols that mark science in a place and time, not as a method but more as a kind of scientific culture. (2008, p. 120)

In other words, the goal in contemporary History is *to use something small to say something big*. This in turn implies an interaction by the author with the contemporary context—a receiving audience with beliefs, expectations, and knowledge—using an historical discovery, which is itself treated in a way that is consistent with its own context (i.e., treated in an “historicist” way). That is then where the “something big” comes from: it is an insight that arises from an interaction, mediated by the historian's view of the past, with the contemporary audience's understanding.

Sometimes the “something small” is embodied in an unknown person, the sight of whom reflects new light on an old issue (e.g., Burman, Guida, & Nicolas, 2015). Other times it's an unknown dispute, which serves to add complexity to the present understanding in previously unthinkable ways (e.g., Nicolas, Andrieu, Croizet, Sanitioso, & Burman, 2013). Or it's a new approach, which allows details to cohere in a new way (Ratcliff & Burman, in press). But still other times it's a collection of representative stories. And this is why the book is often the historian's best rhetorical tool: books are

collections of examples that, when the parts are considered together as reflections of a larger whole, provide a glimpse of the bigger picture.

Galison (2008, p. 120) refers to Ginzburg's (1976/1980) *The Cheese and the Worms* in this connection, and we see there that his historical subject—the heretic Menocchio—was influenced, as Araujo intends, by several philosophical texts. This is therefore where we might also seek to find Araujo's sought-after philosophical history: in the rhetoric that sets up the microhistories, and in the construction of an historical argument written for a contemporary audience with specific knowledge and particular interests.

That view seems consistent with Araujo's definition: "A philosophical history of psychology ... is a history of psychology guided by specific philosophical questions" (Araujo, 2017, p. 96). Yet he clarifies his position in a way that is problematic for his argument, that philosophical history is something that should exist alongside critical history: "the central goal in a philosophical history of psychology is to reveal how the historical development and elaboration of psychological projects is closely related to philosophical assumptions" (p. 96). In other words, he seeks a place for the philosophical context in which psychological projects originate: the prior textual conditions that made subsequent ideas possible.

Galison (2008) called this "the context of argument" (p. 113). Related notions, he points out (pp. 116–117), are to be found in "historical epistemology" (how it became possible to know) and "historical ontology" (what it became possible to observe). For Araujo, however, such examinations cannot be intermingled with political, social, and institutional factors. There is no place in his system for soft power; for the reflection of norms in an aesthetics of the intellect (Burman, 2012a, 2015). Nor is there room for the consideration of what makes thoughts thinkable. Or a joke funny. This, though, is one of the hallmarks of contemporary historiography (reflected in e.g., Darnton, 1984/2009). And it's also what Araujo missed of the influence of Thomas Kuhn on the emergence of the New History.

Kuhn and friends

During a so-called "revolution," according to Kuhn (1962/2012), more changes than just the Social and the Intellectual. His argument was rather that the World itself changes: what scientists observe is different after the shift, in a fundamental way, and so too is what they think about what they see. (Observations are "theory-laden," as Hanson, 1958, put it.) Generalizing from this, historians cannot assume that what they see is identical with what their subjects saw. And so, methodologically, the starting place for historians after Kuhn is to dismiss claims to continuity as—to put it bluntly—"ignorant" (Teo, 2013, p. 842).

Kuhn's influence is greatest in English, but his basic argument has influential proponents in many other languages. Araujo mentions Ludwik Fleck's (1935/1979) *Denkkollektiv*. It would then be a mistake, in this context, to omit Gaston Bachelard's (1938/2002) *rupture épistémologique*. Of course, there is also Michel Foucault's (1969/1972; 1966/2002) *épistémè*. And the broader epistemological version of Jean Piaget's stages too (see Tsou, 2006; also Burman, 2007, 2016). The specific details are different, across systems, but they all have the same methodological consequence: *assume difference*. For the sake of brevity, though, let's return to the English source.

Kuhn's (1962/2012) book begins with an audacious statement, which Araujo (2017) also quotes: "History, if viewed as a repository for more than anecdote or chronology, could produce a decisive transformation in the image of science by which we are now possessed" (p. 1). And indeed, it's this—in broad strokes—that became the goal of the New Historians. That, coupled with the combination of other influences, led to a series of changes as the History of Psychology professionalized. But the presumptive developmental sequence was never completed: there was never a revolution (Watrin, 2017).

History and psychology

The relevant courses in psychology departments are still taught primarily by non-specialists (Barnes & Greer, 2014; Bhatt & Tonks, 2002; Brock & Harvey, 2015; Fuchs & Viney, 2002). And it is this group that drives the market for textbooks.¹ Students are therefore served up simplistic old-style anecdotal reviews, highlighting "great ideas" by "great men," rather than detailed archival- and source-driven investigations. Worse, they assume these stories are "what really happened" (Furumoto, 1995). They then come to believe that their chosen discipline had always been progressing toward the way it was at the moment when they learnt it, implying in turn that the future of the discipline will also always reflect what they learned in their undergraduate coursework.

For the most part, in other words, students enrolled in the "history of psychology" course encounter *geniuses* who never failed, as well as *fools* who couldn't help to, and come to accept that their own shortcomings are reason enough to abandon the field after graduation: *you've either got "it," or you don't*. (Or, equivalently: *you're either ahead of your time, or you aren't*.)

This is rubbish. As Kuhn (1962/2012) put it, it is history presented as "a tourist brochure" (p. 1). As a result of continuing to follow such an approach, however, I suggest that we are setting up our students for a shock (if not outright failure).

Our unwillingness to promote a strong and thoughtful historiography—perhaps out of fear of accusations of "methodolatry" (Bakan, 1967; Danziger, 1990a)—has the effect that our students come to believe things about Psychology that have never been the case, and also that perfection at any cost is the price of highest achievement. By failing to protect them from this unreal expectation, we are therefore scaffolding disappointment, disillusionment, self-deception, and fraud. Yet, for this very reason, Araujo is to be applauded: the History of Psychology must certainly be strengthened, as a discipline, and this will only happen through open debate. But I don't agree with his rhetoric in setting up his argument. Indeed, I worry that his proposal could be misunderstood as advocating for something akin to an advancement merely of the present state of textbook writing.

Araujo will certainly reply that his approach is more in-depth. And I don't deny this. (I am a firm believer in demonstrating how later ideas originated in earlier lineages, and thereby showing how previously incomprehensible or badly misunderstood ideas make sense in their proper context; e.g., Burman, 2012a, 2012b, 2013, 2015, 2016.) My concern is rather with how his explanation of the approach will be understood; the impact it could have in its present form.

My view is that critical historiography is not just more in-depth than textbook history; it's also different in kind. Yet this is not what most students encounter in their coursework.

Textbook histories typically reflect a view of Psychology that its practitioners *wish* they saw. These non-specialist works are therefore themselves a response to the realization that something is wrong with the way contemporary psychologists view the discipline, but with narratives hobbled by their authors' lack of training and exposure to exactly the deeper context that would help them to address their angst.

In short, I suggest that these authors typically do *not* aim to provide Histories in the Rankean "scientific" sense reflected today in the practices advocated-for by the New Historians of Psychology. Instead, their textbooks use selective presentations of the past in order to map an *idealized* view of the present (cf. Ash, 1983; see also Kuhn, 1991/2000, p. 282, 1962/2012, §9). Whether or not they intend for this to be the case, the result is then an unavoidably political one: the underlying ideology is *obscured*, or *denied*, and thus it is also *conserved* (e.g., Burman, 2015). And this in turn undermines the very status of Psychology as an open and dynamic scientific discipline, even as it attempts to protect it.

This, to put it briefly, is my worry about Araujo's rhetoric. A philosophical history, done in the way described, risks becoming a history presented for the purposes to which the philosopher puts it: microphilosophy, using historical sources to present a contemporary philosophical argument, rather than microhistory directed toward understanding the foreign invisible from inside the logic of its own perspective.

That is not a complement to contextualism. It is a counterstrike against it. But what is my alternative?

Ideas are never only lights in the attic. As the historian looks in, we must always remember that—at the time—someone was looking out. This then affords some basic and obvious questions: *Who? Where? When? How?* And Araujo's point, in arguing for a philosophical history: *What?* But because this *whatever-it-was* must also have existed in context, the questioning begins anew: *for whom, where, when, and how?* Still, I accept that Araujo may disagree. If that is the case, however, I need only follow Galison's (2008) lead: "Lay out that part of historical explanation that is not itself subject to historicization and argue the case why not" (p. 123). The discipline would certainly benefit.

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Note

1. This was made clear to me most recently in discussions with Darren Reed, the Senior Commissioning Editor for Psychology at Wiley-Blackwell. I had been asked to review a textbook on the history of psychology that was written by an enthusiastic supporter of the History of Psychology who was also nonetheless a non-specialist. My question back to Reed was whether there was room for such an approach in the Wiley portfolio, given that they had already published very high-quality textbooks by specialist authors like Pickren and Rutherford (2010) and Benjamin (2014; supplemented by Benjamin, 2006, 2009). Reed replied that, in fact, the

primary market for such texts is not a specialist audience because those who teach the course are primarily non-specialists (personal communication, September 3, 2015). The market's demand was therefore not being met, despite the very high quality of the extant offerings. And this implies an important corollary, on which it seems Araujo and I agree: *specialists need to figure out how to speak to the audience that exists, and not only a small subset.*

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